

**POETRY AS A PROCESS OF THINKING.  
AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES BERNSTEIN**

(Conducted by Manuel Brito)

Charles Bernstein is a leading figure in contemporary American poetic scene. He is the author of 15 collections of poetry including *Dark City* (1994), *Rough Trades*, (1991), and *The Absent Father in Dumbo* (1990) among others. He has published books of essays such as *A Poetics* (1992), *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (1986) and a 1984 collaboration with Bruce Andrews: *The L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e Book*. His poetic explorations lead us to an understanding of new methods in American poetry. Recently he has organized a poetics group through Internet as a way to discuss the role of poetry in society and to challenge traditional conceptions and boundaries of genres, culture as well as of form. He teaches at the State University of New York, Buffalo.

M.B.: Could you be defined as a "demanding poet" looking for answers?

C.B.: I'm more looking for questions, constantly trying to upturn any set way of putting things, although, in the process, I do hover in proximity to something like answers, if responding, or being answerable to yourself, to your language, is an answer. I suppose I make a lot of presumptions in my work, in that the poems don't explain themselves. What interests me in a phrase or line is not always self-evident, it's only that it strikes me. I demand a lot from the materials (the words and the connections among them), but then, it seems like they demand a lot from me. Yet I'm never far from what's for me, anyhow, verbal pleasure, because if you demand a lot from words all of sudden they start to talk back to you in the most intimate and also engaging way, and that engagement has a lot to do with the intensified soundscape of the poem and also with the acceleration of play (puns, rimes, misnomers, vowel and consonant repetition, and the dozens of other related devices of a trade in language). I figure if a reader or listener can't make out a particular reference or train of thought, that's okay --it's very much the way I experience things in everyday life. If the poem is at times puzzling or open-ended or merely suggestive, rather than explicit, maybe it gives readers or listeners more space for their own interpretations and imaginations. Different readers pick up different things and for any reader certain allusions are bound to be striking while others will seem opaque, but which is which changes from reader to reader. What I like in poems is encountering the unexpected and I enjoy not knowing where I am or what comes next. Which means I try to derail trains of thoughts as much as follow them; what you get is a mix of different types of language pieced together as in a mosaic --very "poetic" diction next to something that sounds overheard, intimate address next to philosophical imperatives, plus a mix of would-be proverbs, slogans, jingles, nursery rhymes, songs. I love to transform idioms as much as traditional metrics because I'm looking to say things I can only say in poems; I'm, driven by that necessity. Sometimes there's a gap between sentences, sometimes the sound or sentiment carries over that gap: these shifting, modulated transitions express my philosophy as much as my prosody. For me poetry and poetics are not so much a matter of how I can make

words mean something I want to say but rather letting language find ways of meaning through me. For is never more than an extension of sound and syntax: the music of poetry is the sound of sense coming to be in the world.--I Wouldn't know an answer if it stood on my head. A good joke, though... that's a different matter.

M.B.: You affirm in "Amblyopia" (in *The Sophist*) that we have to assume the spirit of balance, in which sense?

C.B.: That's the section about the "rate on purchase" and "the balance of every purchase". I loved the strains of Puritan sermon that run through this passage, lifted verbatim from the back of a credit card bill, and set in lines. One of the many "fine print" language types that are constantly at the periphery of consciousness, but which we rarely focus on. I only focussed on it myself because I was reading it aloud as part of a proofreading job. Is this the poetry of everyday life, a discrete particular? --well, only in my twisted (twisting) sense of these things. Or do things like our credit card contracts provide an allegory for a spiritual or religious contract we've entered into --as if, in a consume-on-credit society we are, indeed, each judged by the balance of (and on) our purchases, and where our purchase is much more than a dinner or a couch, but a "purchase" in the figurative sense of that word, a position of advantage in the world, for which we may not be prepared to pay the bill, unaware of the hidden charges. I've never been much for balance, but there's clear advantage to staying on your feet or not falling off the bed. I was a slow learner (which I suppose may be why I like to teach): It found it difficult to reproduce socially prized models of balance, symmetry and grace; no doubt I grew to resent these things, more often conventions than the immutable principals they purported to be. It seemed to me I kept my balance in some mighty awkward ways: it may be my aesthetic now, but it was largely given to me by disadvantage. Disadvantage, that is, puts you in mind of your particular vantage and that enables some sort where posture, say, or grammar, is not the only factor. Within a poem, the more active questions of eco-balance are one of proportion and judgement. I think what may make my work seem difficult is that I am always testing my judgments, throwing them this interrogation, of judgment and senses of proportion constitute the aesthetic process for me. On balance, I am reminded of a remark made by Wittgenstein to his sister, Hermine: "You remind me of somebody who is looking out through a closed window and cannot explain to himself the strange movements of a passerby. He cannot tell what sort of storm is raging out there or that this person might only be managing with difficulty to stay on his feet." When the reader is sealed off from the world of the poem, it may well seem strange and demanding; it is only when you get a sense for this world, and not just the words, that the poem can begin to make sense.

M.B.: Sometimes you seem to be really concerned about the arrangement of lines, a preoccupation you share with poets such as Pound or Olson. How does this aspect affect your mode of writing?

C.B.: Preoccupation is a good way to put, ever so much nicer than obsession, which is one way to look a recurring interest that has no rhyme or reason. I'm attracted to the idea of lines being a primarily visual feature of the poem --it's a modest way of designing (or arranging) how the page looks, an overlay --one more dynamic of the poems multi-layered ecosystem. Often I don't leave pauses for the line breaks when I perform a poem, which suggests that they are not principally related to the temporal soundtext (or phonotext). But then again, in performance, there are many more ways to cur different tones, voices, rhythms, beats, and phrasing than on the page, that the line becomes a crucial device for setting such things in motion. If the line is relatively independent of the phonotext, then that's one of its great advantages, because you can play with the peculiarly visual space of the page, which is a particular feature of writing as opposed to spoken language or other nonverbal signifying practices. Given my interest in interruption (more than fragmentation), the line allows for a visual interruption of the phrase (or sentence) without necessarily requiring a temporal interruption, a pause: that's why I so often cut the line where you are least likely to pause (say between an article and a noun). When you break the line against the phrase, rather than at the end of a phrase, it's called syntactic scissoring; this preoccupies me because I can use it to set in motion a counter-measure that adds to the rhythmic richness of the poem: the main measure in the phrasally forward movement of the phonotext, and the countermeasure of the syntactic scissoring of the visual text. I'm mindful of Dennis Tedlock's useful discussion of the line as a device for registering oral dynamics of native American verbal art. Tedlock's use of the line in his translations/transcriptions is as far from traditional prosody as anything any else modernist poetry has come up with. Tedlock roundly condemns the use of prose to convey the hyperdynamic soundscape of oral literature, and has developed ways to cue not just different lengths of pausing, but also pitch, loudness, and other features of the phonotext. I'm very attracted to the acoustic tactility both of the oral literature he is attending to and also his ways of transforming it into a multitextured writing. ("Writing wrongs speech," as Neil Schmitz puts it in his book on Twain and Stein.) In creating an aural poetry, I think it's possible to have the resonant presence of language without hypostatizing a single speaker as the source of the language. Writing, that is, can become answerable to itself in ways that do not advance upon orality but are co-present with it. To do this, however, writing cannot revert to the conditions of orality, nostalgically imagining itself as secondary, as transcript of the voice, but rather must acknowledge its own materiality and acoustic density/destiny, its visible aurality. But here I am already answering your next question.

M.B.: *Poetic Justice* and *Disfrutes* are characterized by the objectual dimension of the word itself, you play with the typography, sound and a certain disorientation at the level of content. Would you explain more profoundly the purposes of your position?

C.B.: *Disfrutes*, my earliest published work, basically plays on slight shifts in sound patterns and miniature word arrangements. The most minimal is four one-word lines"

"sand/ and/ sane/ an" which follows the *an* sound through to itself. I still find this kind of progression curiously satisfying, even though I wouldn't isolate it the way I did in *Disfrutes*; but it does typify the kind of detail I use in composing my by now rococo works. In *Poetic Justice* I interRUPT words by uSiNg caPitAl lETTeRs tO cREaTe A kiNd of pulsInG eNergY: again with the idea that interruption and disruption actually create intensity and rhythm, by emphasizing the physical qualities both of the sound and the visual representation of words.

M.B.: Can the films you realized with Henry Hills be seen under this same perspective?

C.B.: What Henry's done is to create a phonotext, a.k.a. soundtrack, by splicing together small bits of sync-sound film, often just a few seconds each. It's an incredible mosaic, which exemplifies the sort of constructed aurality I've been discussing. One way I write poems is to assemble, create an order for, an increasingly wild variety of bits, units, bytes, hits, sections, units, phrases --segments. Hills shoots in sync sound then cuts the shoots into short 'scenes'. The soundtrack is made by physically splicing these scenes --bits of sync sound/image-- together. Focussing just on the acoustic level, he is creating, by this process, a sound poem, or collage text. Still, there are crucial differences between film and poetry. One of the main differences, retrievability, the ability to reread, review, specified moments, is beginning to vanish. When Hills's films are seen in video, you'll be able to slow them up, stop them, a viewing situation that approaches, without ever intersecting, reading a book. In contrast, a screening of the film would more closely parallel hearing a poet perform a work. Two different performance modes are now available. There's another aspect, however. Because it's in sync sound, meaning that all the sound was recorded live, whenever the sound is cut-up you also have the *picture*, and therefor a gesture, also cut-up. Accompanying the sound is always this outward picture --a *body*. When Henry's editing the particular sound or syllable or phrase --sequencing segments-- you have in each segment, in addition to the sound, the movement, the gestures of the body. That's again the extraordinary thing about the films, that the sound is simultaneously registered as gestures of the body, the sound embodies even as it is cut-up, dislocated from its original context. In Hills's films, there is an elaborate scoring or choreography of these gestures.

M.B.: Is experimentation, as an active process, sufficient by itself?

C.B.: That would be true for some of the works of Jackson Mac Low or John Cage or William Burroughs --works that are a valuable resource for my writing. My own preoccupations, however, are not with experimentation as much as evocation, instantiation, arbitration, and reclamation.

M.B.: The quotidian, or elements related to our daily life are present in many of your poems. What is your interest in this approach?

C.B.: Another preoccupation: the ordinary, a tradition more often associated with a plainer style than mine, but then what could be more everyday than words? It's a strange pull, since even then I often use arcane, rather than everyday, words. But it's the texture of everyday experience I'm after, how language both contains and engenders experience. And many of the particulars that litter my poems are indeed everyday sayings (sometimes inverted) and overhead comments. Moreover, the mix of elements, including the discontinuity and interruption, is part of the fabric of everyday life in the present.

M.B.: *Veil* is introduced by a quotation from Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil*. How can be understood the metaphor of the veil as applied to your poetry?

C.B.: Let me finish up by answering that question together with your next one, about the "us'ness" I write about in *Content's Dream*. *Veil* is my most visually oriented work. The visual emblem is produced by several layers of overtyping, so that much, but not all, of the freely composed writing is obliterated. One model I had was Morris Louis's "Veil" paintings, where successive stains of colors occlude the inner layers, though at the edges the brightest of the suppressed underlayers of color, shines through, ecstatically. The sense of stain, as in soiling, and its associated sadness, is crucial; but also, as in biochemistry, the stain allowing you to identify otherwise invisible substances. In this sense, my poetry is an acoustic staining. That's why I'm inclined to dwell on (in) forms of damage, maladjustment, dislocation. This is not an aesthetic theory so much as an experiential dynamic --call it the everyday: that we have our misalignments more in common than our adjustment to the socially correct norms. Normalcy is the enemy of poetry --my poetry, "our" poetry. When today's *New York Times* runs a piece on out-of-sync kids and how "we" can help them fit in, I see my poetics (and their debt to Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Emerson) spelled out in reverse. "We've all known children like this," Jane Brody begins, "they stand too close or they touch us in annoying ways; they laugh too loud or at the wrong times; they make "stupid" or embarrassing remarks,... they mistake friendly actions for hostile ones,... they move too slowly, or too fast, for everyone else; their facial expressions don't jibe with what they or others are saying, or their experience is seriously out of step with current fashions." While I both identify and try to attend to such differences, peculiarities and idiosyncracies of perception, the article predictably prescribes the psychological orthodontics of correction and behavioral modification to obliterate the dis-ease, which is given the high-fallutin' name of dyssemia (flawed signal reception), a suitable companion discipline to my own poetic preoccupation, dysraphism. The veil acknowledges the stigma that is our common ground, our point of adjacency with one another, our 'us'ness. Here, *Weil* is related to a short book of my poems called *Stigma*, based on the title of one of Erving Goffman resonant books on this topic. In the Hawthorne story, the minister who veils his face gives an explanation that I use as the epigraph for the book: "There is an hour to come when all of us shall cast aside our veils. Take it not amiss, beloved friend, if I wear this piece of crape till then." Our bodies veil is from

transparency (say, assimilation) and the veil acknowledges that: that we can't communicate as if we had no veils or bodies or histories separating us, that whatever communication we can manage must be in terms of our opacities and particularities, our resistances and impermeabilities --call it our mutual translucency to each other. Our language is our veil, but one that too often is made invisible. Yet, hiding the veil of language, its wordness, its textures, its obstinate physicality, only makes matters worse. Perhaps such veils will be cast aside in the Messianic moment, that utopian point in which history vanishes. On this side of the veil, which is our life on earth, we live within and among the particulars of a here (hear) and now (words that speak of and to our condition of everydayness).